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Ad Agency Is Aiming to Reinvent the Wheel

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By Dawn Wotapka

By Friday, 250 cabs with stationary 'hubcap billboards' will be going around L.A. More will hit the road this summer.

A Santa Monica ad agency thinks the latest advertising hot spot has been around for ages--but it isn't billboards, buttons or bumper stickers.

Try the wheel.

AdFleet Advertising US is unveiling advertisements this week that are designed to be mounted on taxicab hubcaps. The patented 16-inch steel disks are affixed to the lug nuts and remain stationary as the wheels turn. They're readable at high speeds, according to AdFleet, and not one has fallen off during extensive testing.

"We've got something that's new and something that's creative," said Ian M. Klassen, president and co-founder of 2-year-old AdFleet. "It's actually a fairly robust piece of engineering."

By Friday, 250 cabs with "hubcap billboards" will be rolling around Los Angeles, Klassen said, and about 1,750 more are set to hit the road by summer's end.

Local clients include Taco Bell Corp., 1800CheapSeats Inc., Virgin Drinks North America and the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Nationally, the ads are set to premiere this summer on as many as 7,500 more cabs in cities such as Dallas, Houston and Atlanta, New York--the nation's cab capital--is in the works, Klassen said.

The financial details are still being worked out. Advertisers are paying as much as \$250 a month per cab--with \$50 going to the cabby. But some of AdFleet's initial clients are getting a free ride.

For instance, Jiffy Lube International Inc. isn't paying for a month long test campaign involving 50 L.A.-area taxis.

But that could change. If the test campaign gets positive results, Jiffy Lube might run the ads in other areas and start paying for them, said Brian Smith, an account coordinator with ad agency Kovel/Fuller, which handles the chain's southern California advertising.

"It's really a cool visual effect that draws the consumer's eyes toward the taxi and toward the wheel," he said.

Virgin Drinks signed on because the idea taps "real estate that's not really being utilized," said Ranjit Singh, the company's chief operating officer.

That's important. As consumers watch less network television and become more difficult to reach, advertisers must be more creative, said David W. Stewart, a professor of marketing at USC.

He predicts the taxi ads will generate a buzz--at least initially.

"Like most things, it will blend into the scenery, and people will start to ignore it," he said. "In due course, it will become just another part of the advertising landscape."

That's why Klassen already is working on his next big idea: putting a "monster of a disk" on bus wheels.

